

All cultures are not equal

'I denounce European colonialism', wrote CLR James. 'But I respect the learning and profound discoveries of Western civilisation.' (1)

James was one of the great radicals of the twentieth century, an anti-imperialist, a superb historian of black struggles, a Marxist who remained one even when it was no longer fashionable to be so. But today, James' defence of 'Western civilisation' would probably be dismissed as Eurocentric, even racist.

To be radical today is to display disenchantment with all that is 'Western' - by which most mean modernism and the ideas of the Enlightenment - in the name of 'diversity' and 'difference'. The modernist project of pursuing a rational, scientific understanding of the natural and social world - a project that James unashamedly championed - is now widely regarded as a dangerous fantasy, even as oppressive.

'Subjugation', according to the philosopher David Goldberg, 'defines the order of the Enlightenment: subjugation of nature by human intellect, colonial control through physical and cultural domination, and economic superiority through mastery of the laws of the market' (2). The mastery of nature and the rational organisation of society, which were once seen as the basis of human emancipation, have now become the sources of human enslavement.

Enlightenment universalism, such critics argue, is racist because it seeks to impose Euro-American ideas of rationality and objectivity on other peoples. 'The universalising discourses of modern Europe and the United States', argues Edward Said, 'assume the silence, willing or otherwise, of the non-European world.' (3)

Not just for radicals, but for many mainstream liberals too, the road that began in the Enlightenment ends in savagery, even genocide. As the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues: 'Every ingredient of the Holocaust... was normal... in the sense of being fully in keeping with everything we know about our civilisation, its guiding spirits, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world - and of the proper ways to pursue human happiness together with a perfect society.' (4)

This belief that modernism lies at the root of all evil is so pervasive that only right-wing reactionaries, like Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, former UK prime minister Margaret Thatcher or the late Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, it sometimes seems, are willing unreservedly to defend James' belief in the superiority of 'the learning and profound discoveries of Western civilisation'.

So the real question to ask in the wake of 11 September 11 is not, as many have suggested, 'Why do they hate us?', but rather 'Why do we seem to hate ourselves?'. Why is it that Western liberals and radicals have become so disenchanted with modern civilisation that some even welcomed the attack on the Twin Towers as an anti-imperialist act?

CLR James, like most anti-imperialists in the past, recognised that all progressive politics were rooted in the 'Western tradition', and in particular in the ideas of reason, progress, humanism and universalism that emerged out of the Enlightenment. The scientific method, democratic politics, the concept of universal values - these are palpably better concepts than those that existed previously, or those that exist now in other political and cultural traditions. Not because Europeans are a superior *people*, but because out of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution flowed superior *ideas*.

The Western tradition is not Western in any essential sense, but only through an accident of geography and history. Indeed, Islamic learning provided an important resource for both the Renaissance and the development of science. The ideas we call 'Western' are in fact universal, laying the basis for greater human flourishing. That is why for much of the past century radicals, especially third world radicals, recognised that the problem of imperialism was not that it was a Western ideology, but that it was an obstacle to the pursuit of the progressive ideals that arose out of the Enlightenment.

As **Frantz Fanon**, the Martinique-born Algerian nationalist, put it: 'All the elements of a solution to the great problems of humanity have, at different times, existed in European thought. But Europeans have not carried out in practice the mission that fell to them.' (5) For thinkers like Fanon and James, the aim of anti-imperialism was not to reject Western ideas but to reclaim them for all of humanity.

Indeed, Western liberals were often shocked by the extent to which anti-colonial movements adopted what they considered to be tainted notions. The Enlightenment concepts of universalism and social progress, the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss observed, found 'unexpected support from peoples who desire nothing more than to share in the benefits of industrialisation; peoples who prefer to look upon themselves as temporarily backward rather than permanently different'. Elsewhere he noted that the doctrine of cultural relativism 'was challenged by the very people for whose moral benefit the anthropologists had established it in the first place' (6).

How things have changed. 'Permanently different' is exactly how we tend to see different, groups, societies and cultures today. Why? Largely because contemporary society has lost faith in social transformation, in the possibility of progress, in the beliefs that animated anti-imperialists like James and Fanon.

To regard people as 'temporarily backward' rather than 'permanently different' is to accept that while people are potentially equal, cultures definitely are not; it is to

accept the idea of social and moral progress; that it would be far better if everybody had the chance to live in the type of society or culture that best promoted human advancement.

But it's just these ideas - and the very act of making judgements about beliefs, values, lifestyles, and cultures - that are now viewed as politically uncouth. In place of the progressive universalism of James and Fanon, contemporary Western societies have embraced a form of nihilistic multiculturalism. We've come to see the world as divided into cultures and groups defined largely by their difference with each other. And every group has come to see itself as composed not of active agents attempting to overcome disadvantages by striving for equality and progress, but of passive victims with irresolvable grievances. For if differences are permanent, how can grievances ever be resolved?

The corollary of turning the whole world into a network of victims is to transform the West, and in particular the USA, into an all-powerful malign force - the Great Satan - against which all must rage. In Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, one of the central characters, Saladin, finds himself incarcerated in a detention centre for illegal immigrants. Saladin discovers that his fellow inmates have been transformed into beasts - water buffaloes, snakes, manticores. He himself has become a hairy goat.

How do they do it, Saladin asks a fellow prisoner? 'They describe us', comes the reply, 'that's all. They have the power of description and we succumb to the pictures they construct'. There is a similar sense of fatalism in the way that many contemporary radicals view the USA. The Great Satan describes the world, and the world succumbs to those descriptions.

In this fatalism lies a common thread that binds contemporary Western radicalism and fundamentalist Islam. On the surface the two seem poles apart: fundamentalists loathe Western decadence, Western radicals fear Islamic presumptions of certainty. But what unites the two is that both are rooted in contemporary nihilistic multiculturalism; both express, at best, ambivalence about, at worst outright rejection of, the ideas of modernity, universality, and progress. And both see no real alternative to Western power.

Most importantly, both conflate the gains of modernism and the iniquities of capitalism. In this way the positive aspects of capitalist society - its invocation of reason, its technological advancements, its ideological commitment to equality and universalism - are denigrated, while its negative aspects - the inability to overcome social divisions, the contrast between technological advance and moral turpitude, the tendencies towards barbarism - are seen as inevitable or natural.

According to this worldview, all one can hope for, in the words of Edward Said, is 'the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world, in which imperialism courses on, as it were, belatedly, in different forms (the North-South polarity of our time is one), and the relationship of domination continues, but the opportunities for

liberation are open.' (7) But what can liberation mean if nothing is to change and 'imperialism courses on'? Is it not more likely that such a view will give rise, not to a 'generous and pluralistic vision of the world', but to a darkly dystopian and misanthropic one, where all that is left is nihilistic rage - the kind of rage that led to the events of 11 September?

The fury that drove the planes into Twin Towers was nurtured as much by the nihilism and fatalism that now grips much of Western society as by the struggle in Palestine or anywhere else in the third world. There was nothing remotely anti-imperialist or progressive about the attack; nor is there about the visceral anti-Americanism that today animates Islamic fundamentalists and Western radicals alike. There is much to deplore about American society and American foreign policy. But little of it is embodied in the anti-Americanism either of Islamic fundamentalism or of contemporary Western radicalism. Rather, they are both the products of the failure of anti-imperialism, and of a disaffection with the modern world. The irony of such estrangement from modernism is that it is as rooted in the 'Western tradition' as modernism itself - but only in its more reactionary and backward-looking strands.

'Today, we are present at the stasis of Europe', **Frantz Fanon** wrote. Europe 'has shaken off all guidance and all reason, and she is running headlong into the abyss; we would do well to avoid it with all speed.' (8) Forty years ago, Fanon was issuing a clarion call against imperialism. Today he could be equally well warning us about the consequences of what passes for anti-imperialism.

(1) CLR James, 'The Making of the Caribbean People', in *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings* (London: Alison and Busby, 1980), p179

(2) David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p29

(3) Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p58

(4) Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p8

(5) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967 [first pub 1961]), p253

(6) Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978 [first pub 1973]), p53; idem, *The View from Afar* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 [first pub 1983]), p28

(7) Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, pp277-278

(8) Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp253, 252

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